

RUSSIA'S ASSAULT ON UKRAINE AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Assessing and Bolstering the Western Response

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Overview

This current critical phase of the crisis in Ukraine has been manufactured by Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. Russian troops, artillery, armored vehicles, tanks and other equipment [encircle](#) Ukraine: they are along the Russian border with Ukraine and in the annexed territory of Crimea as well as in Belarus, threatening a major military confrontation. It is hard to identify a specific trigger for Russia's decision in 2021 to move thousands of personnel and their armaments close to Ukraine or for the sudden escalation of events in December 2021. The Kremlin's policy toward Ukraine has towed a hard line since the early 2000s; and we can certainly point to an accumulation of factors since Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014, annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and set off the ongoing war in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region that has now cost the lives of more than 13,000 Ukrainians. Nonetheless, the timing seems in many respects driven more by Vladimir Putin's own political predilections and perceptions of developments and reactions in Ukraine, Europe, and the United States rather than by events on the ground in the contested Donbas region.

Russia's latest preparation for what now seems like a potential large-scale invasion of Ukraine was in part sparked by the current Ukrainian government inviting American and NATO forces to conduct joint [exercises](#) and engage in other military [cooperation](#) to boost Ukraine's defensive capabilities against further Russian aggression. Despite the flurry of talks between and among Russia, the U.S., NATO and other allies—including offers to discuss Russian security concerns—since President Biden met with President Putin in [Geneva](#) in June 2021, Moscow has shown no sign of releasing the pressure. Indeed it has [ramped](#) up its military presence in recent weeks.

Emboldened in Eurasia

Several factors are at play for Moscow and Putin. First of all, the past two years have seen significant changes in Eurasia, where developments seem to have reached a tipping point. Thirty years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 2021, and 22 years since Vladimir Putin came to power, Moscow has successfully reasserted itself as the dominant political force and security provider in the region. Only Ukraine and the three Baltic States that achieved membership in both NATO and the European Union in 2004 have managed to stay beyond Moscow's grip. The United States never recognized the Baltic states as part of the USSR after their forcible reincorporation during World War II.

In this context, forcing Kyiv and its leadership back into Russia's orbit is unfinished business for Moscow and Vladimir Putin. Ukraine is the regional outlier in what Russia considers to be its "privileged sphere of interests." Kyiv continues to pursue NATO membership, close ties with Europe and its own economic, political, and foreign policy path, as well as building up its military forces in evident opposition to Russia.

In contrast, other former Soviet states have either been pressured into closer political and security relations with Moscow or into a neutral, marginal international status—by Russia leveraging economic and military ties or exploiting a territorial conflict. As one notable example, Georgia’s current government treads more carefully with Russia than its predecessor. Russia, of course, invaded Georgia in August 2008. Georgia’s then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, a perennial thorn in Moscow’s side, saw his popularity plummet in the aftermath and was eventually ousted in an election in 2013. He had a second political career in exile in Ukraine, but now sits in jail in Tbilisi after an ill-advised return to Georgia in October 2021. Russian officials and commentators frequently use Saakashvili and his fate as a cautionary tale. In November 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [warned](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of the risks of following Saakashvili’s path. And according to reports from the British government and intelligence agencies, Moscow has been [scheming](#) over the course of the current crisis potentially to replace Ukrainian President Zelenskyy with a pro-Kremlin puppet government.

Next door to Georgia, in Armenia, in summer 2020, President Nikol Pashinyan—another leader out of favor with Moscow—saw his domestic position and foreign policy autonomy crushed by war with Azerbaijan. Given the fact that Russia and Armenia have a long-standing defense pact and Russian forces are permanently based in Armenia, Azerbaijan’s military assault to retake territory occupied by Armenia for three decades is unlikely to have been feasible without a green light from Moscow. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan resisted the imposition of Russian forces on the frontlines in Nagorno-Karabakh after a ceasefire was brokered in 1994, preferring that an international force oversee the implementation of any final resolution of the conflict. Russia exploited the 2020 war to introduce its military forces into Nagorno-Karabakh under the guise of peacekeepers. Russia has now moved to broker and manage Armenia’s future relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey, sidelining the OSCE Minsk Group that previously managed international diplomacy in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Elsewhere, in 2020-2021, Belarussian strongman Aleksandr Lukashenko, who infuriated Moscow with his frequent political overtures to Brussels and Washington at Russia’s expense, was forced back into the fold frightened by the wrath of his own disgruntled population. Lukashenko and Belarus now host new contingents of Russian military forces and war game exercises on Ukraine’s northern border. Similarly, in January 2022, Russia and its regional security alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), were called in to quash protests and quell a political power struggle in Kazakhstan. This was the first time that the CSTO was deployed to the territory of a member country.

Russia feels emboldened by these developments in Eurasia. The United States played no significant role in addressing the upheavals. It was conspicuous in its absence. From Russia’s perspective, the United States [seems](#) grievously weakened at home and abroad. For Vladimir Putin, America’s political disarray, President Biden’s difficulties in achieving his domestic agenda, combined with China’s rise at the expense of the United States since the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 seem to mirror Russia’s predicament immediately after the dissolution of the USSR. In the 1990s, the United States and NATO pressed a politically and economically beleaguered Russia to withdraw its military forces from Eastern Europe. In Putin’s view, America’s predicament offers a rare opportunity. If the United States really is in a state of collapse at home and in retreat abroad, as the Kremlin assesses, then perhaps Russia [can overturn](#) the last 30 years of American dominance in European security, in addition to constricting Ukraine’s independence.

Seeing Opportunity in Europe

Moscow also sees ample opportunity to take advantage of developments in western and eastern Europe. The reverberations from Brexit, Poland and Hungary’s disputes with the EU, the legacy of four years of rifts between the U.S. and its European allies during the tumult of the Trump presidency, the departure of long-serving German Chancellor Angela Merkel from the political scene, preparations for presidential

elections in France and Washington's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, have exacerbated other frictions and fractures in NATO and the EU that Russia can exploit.

European military spending and operational readiness have [declined](#) over the last decades relative to the U.S. and Russia. Despite an [uptick](#) in spending and deployments since Russia annexed Crimea, the two other significant European military actors, the UK and France, are increasingly at [loggerheads](#), while Turkey is preoccupied with Syria and the Middle East. Russian saber rattling has fueled European anxieties about their ability to protect NATO and EU member states from Russian aggression let alone non-members like Ukraine.

In addition, Europe's punitive financial tools, along with the political will to deploy them, have been weakened. Moscow has effectively moved over the past decade of Putin's rule to shore up the Russian economy against Western sanctions, including through paying off state debts and making strategic direct [investments](#) in companies across Europe in critical infrastructure, energy, and metallurgy. As soon as the United States and Europe imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin moved to [adopt](#) explicit import substitution policies in defense, food and other critical sectors. Despite the friction with their governments, Putin notably still encouraged close business cooperation with all foreign corporations previously invested in Russia, including American companies.

Putin has long made it clear that he sees the global economy as a battlefield where he must defend Russia's economic interests and maximize Moscow's options and leverage. He has instructed Russian oligarchs in his innermost circle to "de-offshore" or [repatriate](#) their key operations and assets, and diversified Russia's trade relations away from Europe and the U.S. But he has also assiduously [courted](#) international corporations to give them a direct stake in the Russian economy. Putin continues to try to [deepen](#) ties with the private sectors of key European countries even at the height of this crisis to off-set any retaliatory economic actions the West might take.

Putin and the Kremlin believe that European and American investors in Russia, and those who manage or work in Russian-owned companies in Europe, will always work in Russia's and their own corporate interests rather than in support of their governments' positions. They will serve as Russian allies and advocates for limited sanctions, and they will push for a speedy reconciliation with Russia, limiting their government's appetites and capacity for confrontation.

For Putin, trade and investment are means of securing political leverage, along with offering lucrative positions on Russian corporate boards to former high-ranking Western politicians and grandees. Putin, for example, recently [met](#) with the heads of leading Italian companies to discuss their business in Russia, seeing Italy as a potential weak link in European unity. Putin has now been at this a [long](#) time, seeking to create a new version of the Cold War era mutually assured nuclear destruction in the advent of a political and economic standoff. If the West pulls the economic sanctions trigger, Western interests will suffer too.

Maximalist Positions

Russia's assessment of its opportunities for action in Eurasia and Europe became clear in twin documents submitted to [NATO](#) and the [U.S.](#) on December 17, 2021. Moscow laid out maximalist positions on three sets of issues: 1) Ukraine; 2) NATO, and the future expansion of the alliance; and 3) the role of the United States in European security and internationally.

Against the backdrop of threats and wargames, the December 17 documents reinforced Moscow's much-emphasized demand for an ironclad guarantee from NATO that Ukraine and other former republics of the USSR will not at any point become members of the alliance. Russia's December 17 documents also

demanding an end to further NATO expansion (which would preclude close Alliance partners like Sweden and Finland seeking membership); NATO pulling back forces and weapons deployed in Eastern Europe since its first round of expansion to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1999; and the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe. The U.S. and NATO recently [provided](#) written responses to these demands—maintaining their long-held position that Moscow’s demands for a veto over NATO expansion are non-starters, but underscoring that they are open to discussions on reforming and refurbishing European security institutions as well as to negotiations on the disposition of conventional and nuclear forces in Europe.

As far as NATO is concerned, Russia sees the institution as an extension of the United States, not an alliance based on mutual interest, collective defense, and voluntary association. Moscow continues to view the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Cold War terms, as the equivalent of the Warsaw Treaty Organization that USSR created as a mirror image and coerced Eastern Europe into. Russian officials and commentators routinely deny any agency or independent strategic thought to any NATO member other than the United States. Note, for example, that Russia has not sent any similar documents to our North American neighbor, Canada, challenging its role in European security, despite its membership in both NATO and the OSCE and close ties to Ukraine. Canada and other countries barely exist in Russia’s calculations.

In terms of Russia’s opposition to NATO expansion, Vladimir Putin first put the U.S. and NATO on notice in a [speech](#) at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. Putin asserted that Russia was rankled by the post-Cold War emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the United States and by NATO in Europe. Putin emphasized that Russia could not, and would not, countenance any further expansion of the Alliance beyond the Baltic states and the seven East European countries that joined NATO together in 2004. Russia made good on Putin’s “notice” to the Munich Security Conference in August 2008. The Russian military moved into Georgia in the aftermath of NATO’s April 2008 Bucharest Summit, where both Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual membership. Russia would have made a similar move against Ukraine then had the government in Kyiv not stepped back from Ukraine’s NATO bid after seeing what happened to Georgia. But, of course, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and sparked off a war in Donbas, when Moscow thought Ukraine was trying to find an alternative route to NATO by concluding an association agreement with the European Union.

Confronting the United States

As far as the United States is concerned, Putin has taken Russia’s ambitions and positions beyond Eurasia and Europe. Russia is consolidating relationships with U.S. adversaries with the blatantly signaled goal of challenging America’s global posture. At the end of January, for example, President Putin [met](#) with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to discuss economic, political and military ties. On January 21, Russia, Iran and China also [began](#) joint naval drills in the northern Indian Ocean, performing joint tactical maneuvering and practicing artillery fire at naval targets, as well as conducting search and rescue missions at sea. This week, on February 4, presidents Putin and Xi will [meet](#) in Beijing at the start of the Winter Olympics to discuss the current situation in and around Ukraine. These are just a few of many instances of Russian efforts to up the ante and draw our attention in other theaters.

Putin has been quite [explicit](#) that successive Russian threats to deploy new nuclear weapons systems, or undermine the current international order are a gambit to get the U.S. to the negotiating table. Russia has long sought a commitment from the U.S., NATO and the European Union that it will have a clearly defined role in post-Cold War European security institutions and decision-making power whenever developments or events run counter to its interests. Russian officials have expressed frustration about the slow response from the United States to Moscow’s repeated requests to engage since 2008, when then President Dmitry Medvedev made a proposal for a new European security order in [Berlin](#).

From Moscow's perspective, successive American administrations have dropped the ball on engaging with Russia to focus on other foreign policy priorities. Indeed, many [observers](#) believed that the Biden Administration also sought to sideline Russia to concentrate on China, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Putin was evidently dissatisfied with the slow pace of bilateral discussions after the first increase of tensions around Ukraine in spring 2021 and his meeting with President Biden in Geneva in June. He clearly believes that he needs to [escalate](#) the situation to keep us focused on Russia's demands and get ahead of the U.S. 2022 midterm elections when our attention will necessarily be diverted to domestic issues. Putin is also mindful of 2024 when we have our presidential election, and he must submit himself for reelection at home. In many respects, time is of the essence for Putin to achieve resolution well before 2024. His public opinion [ratings](#) are not what they used to be. The last time Putin's popular approval fell significantly was before the annexation of Crimea. Annexation [proved](#) universally popular in Russia, boosting Putin's popularity to stratospheric levels. Putin may hope for a similar boost ahead of 2024 by showing the Russian people that he can take decisive action against Ukraine, NATO and the United States.

In the meantime, at home in Russia, Putin has done a good job of making the United States and NATO look like the aggressors and perpetrators of crisis. Abroad, he is bent on convincing the rest of the world that Ukraine is either an internal matter for Russia to resolve or the object of a Cold War-style dust up with the United States—a [proxy](#) war like Korea or Vietnam in the worst case scenario. In [recent Russian polling](#), half of Russians [believed](#) that the U.S. and NATO were to blame for the crisis, and only a tiny fraction thought that Russia itself was to blame. In stark contrast, slightly more than [70 percent](#) of Ukrainians viewed Russia as a hostile state by December 2021 as a result of the rising tensions – up from [60 percent](#) in spring 2021.

Losing Hearts and Minds in Ukraine

This latter point could prove problematic for Putin. The Russian President is a student of history. He knows Russian history inside out, but he also has his very own version of history. The Kremlin and Putin have long deployed Russia values and Russian history as weapons in their conduct of information warfare, especially when it comes to Ukraine. For Putin, every aspect of the Ukraine conflict has been made personal. He has touted and [invoked his own connections](#) to Ukraine and Crimea at every possible opportunity. Every move has been on his timetable and every Russian official and commentator [stresses](#) that the ultimate decisions in Ukraine are up to him and a very small group in his inner circle who share his views.

In the summer of 2021, Putin [published an essay laying](#) out his interpretation of Ukrainian and Russian history: the two countries are one people, state and culture, and they share the same heritage and religion. This essay was in effect an elaboration on his March [2014 address](#) marking the annexation of Crimea, and also on earlier statements and writings. Indeed, almost a decade ago, in 2013, Putin abruptly turned his focus toward Ukraine and its relations with Russia as he worked on shaping a new Russian national narrative. Putin's new narrative rejected the West as a model and put Russia firmly on its own path. And the territory of post-Soviet Ukraine, including Crimea, played a key role in a series of events that Putin selected and spotlighted. Putin depicted Ukraine as Kievan or "holy" *Rus'*, the birthplace and antecedent of the Russian state. He frequently referred to the customary story that his own namesake, "Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev," had assumed Christianity on behalf of "all of Russia" through his baptism in Khersones in Crimea—to become the holy prince Vladimir. Putin also declared that Ukrainians and Russians were not just fraternal peoples: they were one single, united people, part of the same civilization.

This decade old narrative has become a central feature in the current crisis. Putin has asserted that Russia and Ukraine are historically, culturally, linguistically—and inextricably—tied together. They have only

been separated by an accident of history, the collapse of the USSR. In this narrative context, the mere prospect of any kind of formal relationship between Ukraine and NATO, the EU or the U.S. is considered a direct threat to Russia. And so, Putin has used military force against Ukraine in response to its engagement with the West since 2014. His recent orders to move thousands of men and equipment across Russia, including thousands of miles [from the Russian Far East](#) to Ukraine's borders, even if they are not ultimately deployed into Ukraine are not cost free. This is an expensive endeavor. One way or another, Putin means business.

Indeed, Putin has now tethered himself to the futures of both the Russian and the Ukrainian states. Any perceived move against Russia or political shift in Ukraine becomes a threat to his position of power ahead of the 2024 Russian presidential election. When Putin himself threatens, he usually acts. But in acting against Ukraine, Putin and Russia could create an eternal enemy out of a neighboring country, as well as destabilize European and global affairs for years to come.

Acts of aggression against another country, no matter what the motivation, have lasting consequences. They create resentments and new grievances that persist for decades and shape the attitudes and policies of subsequent generations. This was something Putin, in fact, reflected upon at the beginning of his presidency. In a [quasi-autobiography](#) issued in January 2000, Putin was asked by one of the journalists interviewing him whether the Soviet interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 were big mistakes. Yes, they were, he replied. "And you didn't even mention that we used force in East Germany in 1953... They were all big mistakes, in my opinion. And the Russophobia that we have today in Eastern Europe, that's the result of those mistakes."

Countering Putin

Russophobia or negative attitudes towards Russia today in Ukraine and elsewhere are the direct result of Russia military interventions, cyber-attacks and intrusions and political influence operations in the 2000s. In countering Putin on this occasion, we have to demonstrate to Putin that today's actions in and around Ukraine are as significant a mistake as they were in the 1950s and 1960s. We should continue to make it clear to Moscow that we are open to negotiation on a range of stated issues related to strategic stability and our own bilateral relations, but not under current coercive circumstances. Ukraine should not be held hostage to push Russian demands for either a sit-down or a show-down with the United States and NATO.

We need to reframe this crisis for what it is. It is not the result of some hostile act by the United States and NATO. Nor is it a proxy conflict, nor some 'righteous' effort to correct some great [historic wrong](#). This is an act of post-colonial revisionism on the part of Russia. Yes, Ukraine and the other former republics of the Soviet Union were just as much Russian colonies—territories subject to foreign rule—as Ireland and India were for the British Empire, or as constituent states were for the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Ukraine has been an independent country for 30 years, like the rest of the former Soviet republics. Scores of countries from Europe, to the Middle East and Asia secured their independence from the disintegration of empires and the fracturing of other states in the 20th century, across a long period from the end of World War I through to the end of the Cold War. The facts that many Ukrainian citizens speak Russian and parts of Ukrainian territory were incorporated into the Russian Empire in earlier centuries are [irrelevant](#). The United States won its independence from Great Britain and remains separate despite shared linguistic and cultural heritage. Australia, Canada and New Zealand were settled by British citizens and have English as their official language. And we also do not view German-speaking Austria as part of Germany and rejected attempts during World War II to join them together.

If Putin launches a further incursion into Ukraine on this basis with no international condemnation or backlash, then this will set a global precedent for other countries engaged in territorial disputes and

threatening their neighbors' sovereignty. What happens in Ukraine and how we react will have international consequences. Other countries' foreign calculations will be ruptured, especially those trying to balance relations among the U.S., China and Russia, such as India and Japan.

The U.S. government has taken this issue to the [United Nations Security Council](#) in the last few days to shine a light on Russian activity. We must press ahead to secure international condemnation of Russian threats and actions at the UN and in other fora. Yes, [Russia](#) has a veto on the UNSC and will likely reject this effort. They will also hold the UNSC chairmanship for the entire month of February. But even if Russia vetoes any resolution condemning Moscow's conduct, the U.S. will have already called Russia out and made efforts to hold Putin to account.

The United States and its European allies have also discussed wide-ranging [sanctions](#) in the event of a Russian invasion. But these will not bite unless the private sector also steps up in some fashion. As long as Putin and Russian oligarchs [continue to sidestep](#) business and personal sanctions and find alternative ways to conduct their business in the West, economic and financial sanctions will not be effective. Businesses and prominent individuals in the U.S. and Europe need to consider curtailing or downgrading their activities with high-profile Russian oligarchs or Kremlin-linked companies connected to Russian malign activity, including declining to attend scheduled Russian investment [conferences](#) and meetings. If international corporations and investors signaled their unease and concern with Russian activities, this could give President Putin pause and open further space for diplomacy. Another Russian invasion and expanded war in Ukraine will be deeply destabilizing for markets and the global economy. It will be bad for business, not just for European and international security.

January 31, 2022

GUEST ESSAY

Putin Has the U.S. Right Where He Wants It

Jan. 24, 2022

By Fiona Hill

Ms. Hill was an intelligence officer on Russia and Eurasian affairs for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and served on the National Security Council under President Donald Trump.

We knew this was coming.

“George, you have to understand that Ukraine is not even a country. Part of its territory is in Eastern Europe and the greater part was given to us.” These were the ominous words of President Vladimir Putin of Russia to President George W. Bush in Bucharest, Romania, at a NATO summit in April 2008.

Mr. Putin was furious: NATO had just announced that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join the alliance. This was a compromise formula to allay concerns of our European allies — an explicit promise to join the bloc, but no specific timeline for membership.

At the time, I was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia, part of a team briefing Mr. Bush. We warned him that Mr. Putin would view steps to bring Ukraine and Georgia closer to NATO as a provocative move that would likely provoke pre-emptive Russian military action. But ultimately, our warnings weren't heeded.

Within four months, in August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia. Ukraine got Russia's message loud and clear. It backpedaled on NATO membership for the next several years. But in 2014, Ukraine wanted to sign an association agreement with the European Union, thinking this might be a safer route to the West. Moscow struck again, accusing Ukraine of seeking a back door to NATO, annexing Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and starting an ongoing proxy war in Ukraine's southeastern Donbas region. The West's muted reactions to both the 2008 and 2014 invasions emboldened Mr. Putin.

This time, Mr. Putin's aim is bigger than closing NATO's "open door" to Ukraine and taking more territory — he wants to evict the United States from Europe. As he might put it: "Goodbye, America. Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Russian President Vladimir Putin. Pool photo by Evgeny Odionkov

As I have seen over two decades of observing Mr. Putin, and analyzing his moves, his actions are purposeful and his choice of this moment to throw down the gauntlet in Ukraine and Europe is very intentional. He has a personal obsession with history and anniversaries. December 2021 marked the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Russia lost its dominant position in Europe. Mr. Putin wants to give the United States a taste of the same bitter medicine Russia had to swallow in the 1990s. He believes that the United States is currently in the same predicament as Russia was after the Soviet collapse: grievously weakened at home and in retreat abroad. He also thinks NATO is nothing more than an extension of the United States. Russian officials and commentators routinely deny any agency or independent strategic thought to other NATO members. So, when it comes to the alliance, all of Moscow's moves are directed against Washington.

In the 1990s, the United States and NATO forced Russia to withdraw the remnants of the Soviet military from their bases in Eastern Europe, Germany and the Baltic States. Mr. Putin wants the United States to suffer in a similar way. From Russia's perspective, America's domestic travails after four years of Donald Trump's disastrous presidency, as well as the rifts he created with U.S. allies

and then America's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, signal weakness. If Russia presses hard enough, Mr. Putin hopes he can strike a new security deal with NATO and Europe to avoid an open-ended conflict, and then it will be America's turn to leave, taking its troops and missiles with it.

Ukraine is both Russia's target and a source of leverage against the United States. Over the last several months Mr. Putin has bogged the Biden administration down in endless tactical games that put the United States on the defensive. Russia moves forces to Ukraine's borders, launches war games and ramps up the visceral commentary. In recent official documents, it demanded ironclad guarantees that Ukraine (and other former republics of the U.S.S.R.) will never become a member of NATO, that NATO pull back from positions taken after 1997, and also that America withdraw its own forces and weapons, including its nuclear missiles. Russian representatives assert that Moscow doesn't "need peace at any cost" in Europe. Some Russian politicians even suggest the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against NATO targets to make sure that we know they are serious, and that we should meet Moscow's demands.

For weeks, American officials have huddled to make sense of the official documents with Russia's demands and the contradictory commentary, pondered how to deter Mr. Putin in Ukraine and scrambled to talk on his timeline.

All the while, Mr. Putin and his proxies have ratcheted up their statements. Kremlin officials have not just challenged the legitimacy of America's position in Europe, they have raised questions about America's bases in Japan and its role in the Asia-Pacific region. They have also intimated that they may ship hypersonic missiles to America's back door in Cuba and Venezuela to revive what the Russians call the Caribbean Crisis of the 1960s.

Mr. Putin is a master of coercive inducement. He manufactures a crisis in such a way that he can win no matter what anyone else does. Threats and promises are essentially one and the same. Mr. Putin can invade Ukraine yet again, or he can leave things where they are and just consolidate the territory Russia effectively controls in Crimea and Donbas. He can stir up trouble in Japan and send hypersonic missiles to Cuba and Venezuela, or not, if things go his way in Europe.

Mr. Putin plays a longer, strategic game and knows how to prevail in the tactical scrum. He has the United States right where he wants it. His posturing and threats have set the agenda in European security debates, and have drawn our full attention. Unlike President Biden, Mr. Putin doesn't have to worry about midterm elections or pushback from his own party or the opposition. Mr. Putin has no concerns about bad press or poor poll ratings. He isn't part of a political party and he has crushed

the Russian opposition. The Kremlin has largely silenced the local, independent press. Mr. Putin is up for re-election in 2024, but his only viable opponent, Aleksei Navalny, is locked in a penal colony outside of Moscow.

So Mr. Putin can act as he chooses, when he chooses. Barring ill health, the United States will have to contend with him for years to come. Right now, all signs indicate that Mr. Putin will lock the United States into an endless tactical game, take more chunks out of Ukraine and exploit all the frictions and fractures in NATO and the European Union. Getting out of the current crisis requires acting, not reacting. The United States needs to shape the diplomatic response and engage Russia on the West's terms, not just Moscow's.

To be sure, Russia does have some legitimate security concerns, and European security arrangements could certainly do with fresh thinking and refurbishment after 30 years. There is plenty for Washington and Moscow to discuss on the conventional and nuclear forces as well as in the cyber domain and on other fronts. But a further Russian invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine's dismemberment and neutralization cannot be an issue for U.S.-Russian negotiation nor a line item in European security. Ultimately, the United States needs to show Mr. Putin that he will face global resistance and Mr. Putin's aggression will put Russia's political and economic relationships at risk far beyond Europe.

Contrary to Mr. Putin's premise in 2008 that Ukraine is "not a real country," Ukraine has been a full-fledged member of the United Nations since 1991. Another Russian assault would challenge the entire U.N. system and imperil the arrangements that have guaranteed member states' sovereignty since World War II — akin to the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, but on an even bigger scale. The United States and its allies, and Ukraine itself, should take this issue to the United Nations and put it before the General Assembly as well as the Security Council. Even if Russia blocks a resolution, the future of Ukraine merits a global response. The United States should also raise concerns in other regional institutions. Why is Russia trying to take its disputes in Europe to Asia and the Western Hemisphere? What does Ukraine have to do with Japan, or Cuba and Venezuela?

Mr. Biden has promised that Russia "will pay a heavy price" if any Russian troops cross Ukraine's borders. If Mr. Putin invades Ukraine with no punitive action from the West and the rest of the international community, beyond financial sanctions, then he will have set a precedent for future action by other countries. Mr. Putin has already factored additional U.S. financial sanctions into his calculations. But he assumes that some NATO allies will be reluctant to follow suit on these sanctions and other countries will look the other way. U.N. censure, widespread and vocal international opposition, and action by countries outside Europe to pull back on their relations with

Russia might give him pause. Forging a united front with its European allies and rallying broader support should be America's longer game. Otherwise this saga could indeed mark the beginning of the end of America's military presence in Europe.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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The Kremlin's Strange Victory **How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and** **Fuels American Decline**

Fiona Hill

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The Kremlin's Strange Victory

How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and Fuels American Decline

Fiona Hill

Donald Trump wanted his July 2018 meeting in Helsinki with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to evoke memories of the momentous encounters that took place in the 1980s between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Those arms control summits had yielded the kind of iconic imagery that Trump loved: strong, serious men meeting in distant places to hash out the great issues of the day. What better way, in Trump's view, to showcase his prowess at the art of the deal?

That was the kind of show Trump wanted to put on in Helsinki. What emerged instead was an altogether different sort of spectacle.

By the time of the meeting, I had spent just over a year serving in the Trump administration as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Coun-

cil. Like everyone else who worked in the White House, I had, by then, learned a great deal about Trump's idiosyncrasies. We all knew, for instance, that Trump rarely read the detailed briefing materials his staff prepared for him and that in meetings or calls with other leaders, he could never stick to an agreed-on script or his cabinet members' recommendations. This had proved to be a major liability during those conversations, since it often seemed to his foreign counterparts as though Trump was hearing about the issues on the agenda for the first time.

When Trump was winging it, he could be persuaded of all kinds of things. If a foreign visitor or caller was one of his favored strongmen, Trump would always give the strongman's views and version of events the benefit of the doubt over those of his own advisers. During a cabinet meeting with a visiting Hungarian delegation in May 2019, for example, Trump cut off acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who was trying to make a point about a critical European security issue. In front of everyone, Trump told Shanahan that the autocratic Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, had already explained it all to him when they had met in the Oval Office moments earlier—and that Orban knew the issue better than Shanahan did, anyway. In Trump's mind, the Hungarian strongman simply had more authority than the American officials who worked for Trump himself. The other leader was his equal, and his staff members were not. For Trump, all pertinent information trickled down from him, not up to him. This tendency of Trump's was lamentable when it played out behind closed doors, but it

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was inexcusable (and indeed impossible to explain or justify) when it spilled out into public view—which is precisely what happened during the now legendarily disastrous press conference after Trump’s meeting with Putin in Helsinki.

Before the press conference, Trump was pleased with how things had gone in his one-on-one meeting with Putin. The optics in Finland’s presidential palace were to Trump’s liking. The two men had agreed to get U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations going again and to convene meetings between their countries’ respective national security councils. Trump was keen to show that he and Putin could have a productive, normal relationship, partly to dispel the prevailing notion that there was something perverse about his ties to the Russian president. Trump was eager to brush away allegations that he had conspired with the Kremlin in its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or that the Russians had somehow compromised him—matters that at the time of the meeting, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was actively investigating.

Things went wrong as soon as the press conference began. Trump expected public praise for meeting with Putin and tackling the nuclear threat. But the U.S. journalists in attendance were not interested in arms control. They wanted to know about the one-on-one meeting and what Putin might have said or not said regarding 2016 and election interference. Jonathan Lemire of the Associated Press asked Trump whether he believed Putin, who had repeatedly denied that his country had done anything to meddle in the election, or the U.S. intelligence agencies, which had concluded the opposite. Lemire

pressed Trump: “Would you now, with the whole world watching, tell President Putin—would you denounce what happened in 2016 and would you warn him to never do it again?”

Trump balked. He really didn’t want to answer. The only way that Trump could view Russia’s broad-based attack on the U.S. democratic system was through the lens of his own ego and image. In my interactions with Trump and his closest staff in the White House, it had become clear to me that endorsing the conclusions of the U.S. intelligence agencies would be tantamount to admitting that Trump had not won the 2016 election. The questions got right to the heart of his insecurities. If Trump said, “Yes, the Russians interfered on my behalf,” then he might as well have said outright, “I am illegitimate.”

So as he often did in such situations, Trump tried to divert attention elsewhere. He went off on a tangent about a convoluted conspiracy theory involving Ukraine and the emails of his 2016 opponent, Hillary Clinton, and then produced a muddled, rambling answer to Lemire’s question, the crux of which was this:

My people came to me. . . . They said they think it’s Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it’s not Russia. I will say this. I don’t see any reason why it would be. . . . But I have confidence in both parties. . . . I have great confidence in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.

The outcome of the Helsinki press conference was entirely predictable, which was why I and others had counseled against holding it at all. But it was

still agonizing to watch. I was sitting in front of the podium as Trump spoke, immediately behind the U.S. national security adviser and the secretary of state. I saw them stiffen slightly, and I contemplated throwing a fit or faking a seizure and hurling myself backward into the row of journalists behind me. I just wanted to end the whole thing. Perhaps contrary to the expectations of many American observers, even Putin was somewhat dismayed. He reveled in the national and personal humiliation that Trump was courting, but he also knew that Trump's careless remarks would provoke a backlash in the United States and thus further constrain the U.S. president's already limited room to maneuver on Russia policy. The modest agreements for further high-level meetings were already out the window. As he exited the room, Putin told his press secretary, within earshot of our interpreter, that the press conference had been "bullshit."

Trump's critics immediately pounced on his bizarre conduct in Helsinki. It was more evidence that Trump was in league with Putin and that the Kremlin held sway over the American president. The following year, Mueller's final investigative report determined that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Trump campaign had in fact been willing to exploit any derogatory information about Clinton that came its way from whatever source, including Russia. In seeking to thwart Clinton's bid to become the first female American president, the Trump campaign and the Kremlin had been acting in parallel; their goals had aligned. Mueller concluded that although this did not amount to a criminal conspiracy, there was

plenty of evidence of an extensive and sophisticated Russian political influence operation against the United States.

The Mueller report also sketched the contours of a different, arguably more pernicious kind of "Russian connection." In some crucial ways, Russia and the United States were not so different—and Putin, for one, knew it. In the very early years of the post-Cold War era, many analysts and observers had hoped that Russia would slowly but surely converge in some ways with the United States. They predicted that once the Soviet Union and communism had fallen away, Russia would move toward a form of liberal democracy. By the late 1990s, it was clear that such an outcome was not on the horizon. And in more recent years, quite the opposite has happened: the United States has begun to move closer to Russia, as populism, cronyism, and corruption have sapped the strength of American democracy. This is a development that few would have foreseen 20 years ago, but one that American leaders should be doing everything in their power to halt and reverse.

Indeed, over time, the United States and Russia have become subject to the same economic and social forces. Their populations have proved equally susceptible to political manipulation. Prior to the 2016 U.S. election, Putin recognized that the United States was on a path similar to the one that Russia took in the 1990s, when economic dislocation and political upheaval after the collapse of the Soviet Union had left the Russian state weak and insolvent. In the United States, decades of fast-paced social and demographic changes and the Great Recession of 2008–9 had weakened the country and increased its

vulnerability to subversion. Putin realized that despite the lofty rhetoric that flowed from Washington about democratic values and liberal norms, beneath the surface, the United States was beginning to resemble his own country: a place where self-dealing elites had hollowed out vital institutions and where alienated, frustrated people were increasingly open to populist and authoritarian appeals. The fire was already burning; all Putin had to do was pour on some gasoline.

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

When Trump was elected, Putin and the Kremlin made no attempt to conceal their glee. They had thought that Clinton would become president and that she would focus on criticizing Putin's style of governance and constraining Russia. They had steeled themselves and prepared for the worst. Instead, they got the best possible outcome from their perspective—a populist, nativistic president with no prior experience in foreign policy and a huge, fragile ego. Putin recognized Trump as a type and grasped his political predilections immediately: Trump, after all, fit a mold that Putin himself had helped forge as the first populist leader to take power in a major country in the twenty-first century. Putin had blazed the trail that Trump would follow during his four years in office.

The essence of populism is creating a direct link with “the people” or with specific groups within a population, then offering them quick fixes for complex problems and bypassing or eliminating intermediaries such as political parties, parliamentary representatives, and established institutions.

Referendums, plebiscites, and executive orders are the preferred tools of the populist leader, and Putin has used them all over the past 20 years. When he came to power on December 31, 1999, at the end of a decade of crisis and strife in Russia, Putin promised to fix everything. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin did not belong to a formal political party. He was the champion of a looser, personalized movement. After 2000, Putin turned Russian presidential elections into national referendums on himself by making sure his rivals were obscure (or wholly manufactured) opposition candidates. And at every critical juncture during his time in power, Putin has adjusted Russia's political system to entrench himself in the Kremlin. Finally, in 2020, he formally amended the constitution so that in theory (and health permitting), he can run for reelection and stay in power until 2036.

All of Putin's machinations greatly impressed Trump. He wanted to “get along” with Russia and with Putin personally. Practically the only thing Trump ever said to me during my time in his administration was to ask, in reference to Putin, “Am I going to like him?” Before I could answer, the other officials in the room got up to leave, and the president's attention shifted; such was life as a female adviser in the Trump White House.

Trump took at face value rumors that Putin was the richest man in the world and told close associates that he admired Putin for his presumed wealth and for the way he ran Russia as if it were his own private company. As Trump freely admitted, he wanted to do the same thing. He saw the United

States as an extension of his other private enterprises: the Trump Organization, but with the world's largest military at its disposal. This was a troubling perspective for a U.S. president, and indeed, over the course of his time in office, Trump came to more closely resemble Putin in political practice than he resembled any of his American predecessors.

At times, the similarities between Trump and Putin were glaringly obvious: their shared manipulation and exploitation of the domestic media, their appeals to their own versions of their countries' "golden age," their compilation of personal lists of "national heroes" to appeal to their voters' nostalgia and conservatism—and their attendant compilation of personal lists of enemies to do the same for their voters' darker sides. Putin put statues of Soviet-era figures back on their pedestals and restored Soviet memorials that had been toppled under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Trump tried to prevent the removal of statues of Confederate leaders and the renaming of American military bases honoring Confederate generals. The two men also shared many of the same enemies: cosmopolitan, liberal elites; the American financier, philanthropist, and open society promoter George Soros; and anyone trying to expand voting rights, improve electoral systems, or cast a harsh light on corruption in their countries' respective executive branches.

Trump also aped Putin's willingness to abuse his executive power by going after his political adversaries; Trump's first impeachment was provoked in part by his attempt to coerce the government of Ukraine into smearing one of

his most formidable opponents, Joe Biden, ahead of the 2020 presidential election. And Trump imported Putin's style of personalist rule, bypassing the professional civil servants in the federal government—a nefarious "deep state," in Trump's eyes—to rely instead on the counsel and interventions of cronies. Foreign politicians called in chits with celebrities who had personal connections to the president and his family, avoiding their own embassies in the process. Lobbyists complained to whomever they could reach in the West Wing or the Trump family circle. They were quick to set attack dogs on anyone perceived as an obstacle and to rile up pro-Trump trolls on the Internet, because this always seemed to work. Influence peddlers both domestic and foreign courted the president to pursue their own priorities; the policymaking process became, in essence, privatized.

The event that most clearly revealed the convergence of politics in the United States and Russia during Trump's term was his disorganized but deadly serious attempt to stage a self-coup and halt the peaceful transfer of executive power after he lost the 2020 election to Biden. Russia, after all, has a long history of coups and succession crises, dating back to the tsarist era, including three during the past 30 years. In August 1991, hard-liners opposed to Gorbachev's reforms staged a brief putsch, declaring a state of emergency and placing Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation home. The effort fizzled, and the coup was a debacle, but it helped bring down the Soviet Union. Two years later, violence erupted from a bitter dispute between the Russian parliament and Yeltsin over

the respective powers of the legislature and the president in competing drafts of a new constitution. Yeltsin moved to dissolve parliament after it refused to confirm his choice for prime minister. His vice president and the Speaker of the parliament, in response, sought to impeach him. In the end, Yeltsin invoked “extraordinary powers” and called out the Russian army to shell the parliament building, thus settling the argument with brute force.

The next coup was a legal one and came in 2020, when Putin wanted to amend Yeltsin’s version of the constitution to beef up his presidential powers—and, more important, to remove the existing term limits so that he could potentially stay on as president until 2036. As a proxy to propose the necessary constitutional amendments, Putin tapped Valentina Tereshkova, a loyal supporter in parliament and, as a cosmonaut and the first woman to travel to outer space, an iconic figure in Russian society. Putin’s means were subtler than Yeltsin’s in 1993, but his methods were no less effective.

It would have been impossible for any close observer of recent Russian history to not recall those episodes on January 6, when a mob whipped up by Trump and his allies—who had spent weeks claiming that the 2020 election had been stolen from him—stormed the U.S. Capitol and tried to stop the formal certification of the election results. The attack on the Capitol was the culmination of four years of conspiracies and lies that Trump and his allies had fed to his supporters on social media platforms, in speeches, and on television. The “Big Lie” that Trump had won the election was built on the

backs of the thousands of little lies that Trump uttered nearly every time he spoke and that were then nurtured within the dense ecosystem of Trumpist media outlets. This was yet one more way in which, under Trump, the United States came to resemble Russia, where Putin has long solidified his grip on power by manipulating the Russian media, fueling nationalist grievances, and peddling conspiracy theories.

I ALONE

Trump put the United States on a path to autocracy, all the while promising to “make America great again.” Likewise, Putin took Russia back toward the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union under the guise of strengthening the state and restoring the country’s global position. This striking convergence casts U.S.-Russian relations and the exigencies of Washington’s approach to Moscow in a new light.

Historically, U.S. policies toward Russia have been premised on the idea that the two countries’ paths and expectations diverged at the end of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western analysts had initially thought that Russia might embrace some of the international institutional arrangements that Washington and its allies had long championed. That, of course, did not happen. And under Putin, U.S.-Russian relations have become more frazzled and fraught than at any point in the 1990s.

There is something confounding about the ongoing confrontation between the two countries, which seems like an artifact from another era. During the Cold War, the stakes of the conflict were undeniable. The Soviet

Union posed an existential threat to the United States and its allies, and vice versa. The two superpowers faced off in an ideological clash between capitalism and communism and a geopolitical tussle over spheres of influence in Europe. Today, Russia maintains the capacity to obliterate the United States, but the Soviet Union and the communist system are gone. And even though foreign policy circles in Washington and Moscow still view U.S.-Russian relations through the lens of great-power competition, the struggle for Europe is over. For the United States, China, not Russia, poses the greatest foreign policy challenge of the twenty-first century, along with the urgent existential threats of climate change and global pandemics.

Yet a sense of confrontation and competition persists. Americans point to a pattern of Russian aggression and provocation: Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent assaults on Ukraine's territory and sovereignty, its intervention in Syria in 2015, the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the frequent ransomware attacks and email hacks attributed to Russian actors. Russians, for their part, point to the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the U.S. bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo war in 1999, Washington's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, U.S. support for the "color revolutions" that took place in post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine in the first decade of this century, and the uprisings in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In Moscow, all of these serve as proof that

Washington is hell-bent on invasion and regime change and also has Russia and Putin in its cross hairs.

In truth, most American policymakers simply wish that Russia would just go away so they can refocus their attention on what really matters. For their Russian counterparts, however, the United States still represents the main opponent. That is because, as a populist leader, Putin sees the United States not just as a geopolitical threat to Russia but also as a personal threat to himself. For Putin, foreign policy and domestic policy have fused. His attempt to retain Russia's grip on the independent countries that were once part of the Soviet Union and to reassert Moscow's influence in other global arenas is inseparable from his effort to consolidate and expand his authority at home.

Putin sits at the apex of a personalized and semi-privatized kleptocratic system that straddles the Russian state and its institutions and population. He has embedded loyalists in every important Russian institution, enterprise, and industry. If Putin wants to retain the presidency until 2036—by which time he will be 84 years old and will have become the longest-serving modern Russian ruler—he will have to maintain this level of control or even increase it, since any slippage might be perceived as weakness. To do so, Putin has to deter or defeat any opponents, foreign or domestic, who have the capacity to undermine his regime. His hope is that leaders in the United States will get so bogged down with problems at home that they will cease criticizing his personalization of power and will eschew any efforts to transform Russia similar to those the U.S. government carried out in the 1990s.

Putin also blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy to distract the Russian population from the distortions and deficiencies of his rule. On the one hand, he stresses how decadent and dissolute the United States has become and how ill suited its leaders are to teach anyone a lesson on how to run a country. On the other hand, he stresses that the United States still poses a military threat and that it aims to bring Russia to its knees. Putin's constant refrain is that the contest between Russia and the United States is a perpetual Darwinian struggle and that without his leadership, Russia will not survive. Without Putin, there is no Russia. He does not want things to get completely out of hand and lead to war. But he also does not want the standoff to fade away or get resolved. As the sole true champion of his country and his people, he can never be seen to stand down or compromise when it comes to the Americans.

Similarly, Putin must intimidate, marginalize, defuse, or defeat any opposition to his rule. Anyone who might stand in his way must be crushed. In this sense, the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Clinton fall into the same category. In Putin's view, if Clinton had become U.S. president, she would have continued to hound him and hold him to task, just as she did when she served as secretary of state in the Obama administration, by promoting democracy and civil society to root out corruption in Russia.

Of course, Navalny is far more dangerous to Putin than Clinton would have been. Navalny is a Russian, not a foreigner. He is a next-generation alternative to Putin: young, handsome,

charismatic, patriotic, and defiant. He poses a threat to Putin not only owing to their differences but also because of a few key similarities: like Putin, Navalny is a populist who heads a movement rather than a party, and he has not been averse to playing on nationalist sentiments to appeal to the same Russian voters who form Putin's base. Navalny has survived an audacious assassination attempt and has humiliated Putin on numerous occasions. By skillfully using digital media and slick video skills to highlight the excesses of the Russian leader's kleptocratic system, Navalny has gotten under Putin's skin. He has forced the Kremlin to pay attention to him. This is why Navalny is in jail and why Putin has moved swiftly to roll up his movement, forestalling any chance that Navalny might compete for the presidency in 2024.

THE TASK AT HAND

The current U.S.-Russian relationship no longer mirrors the Cold War challenge, even if some geopolitical contours and antagonisms persist. The old U.S. foreign policy approach of balancing deterrence with limited engagement is ill suited to the present task of dealing with Putin's insecurities. And after Trump's disastrous performance at Helsinki, it is also clear that the arms control summitry that took the edge off the acute phase of the Cold War and nuclear confrontation can provide little guidance for how to anchor the future relationship. The primary problem for the Biden administration in dealing with Russia is rooted in the domestic politics of the United States and Russia rather than their foreign policies. The two countries have been heading in the

same political direction for some of the same reasons over the last several years. They have similar political susceptibilities. The United States will never change Putin and his threat perceptions, because they are deeply personal. Americans will have to change themselves to blunt the effects of Russian political interference campaigns for the foreseeable future. Achieving that goal will require Biden and his team to integrate their approach to Russia with their efforts to shore up American democracy, tackle inequality and racism, and lead the country out of a period of intense division.

The polarization of American society has become a national security threat, acting as a barrier to the collective action necessary for combating catastrophes and thwarting external dangers. Partisan spectacles during the global COVID-19 pandemic have undermined the country's international standing as a model of liberal democracy and eroded its authority on public health. The United States' inability to get its act together has hindered the projection of American soft power, or what Biden has called "the power of our example." During my time in the Trump administration, I watched as every peril was politicized and turned into fodder for personal gain and partisan games. Successive national security advisers, cabinet members, and their professional staffs were unable to mount coherent responses or defenses to security issues in the face of personalized, chaotic, and opportunistic conduct at the top.

In this regard, Putin actually offers an instructive contrast. Trump railed against a mythological American deep state, whereas Putin—who spent

decades as an intelligence operative before ascending to office—is a product of Russia's very real deep state. Unlike Trump, who saw the U.S. state apparatus as his enemy and wanted to rule the country as an outsider, Putin rules Russia as a state insider. Also unlike Trump, Putin rarely dives into Russia's social, class, racial, or religious divisions to gain political traction. Instead, although he targets individuals and social groups that enjoy little popular support, Putin tends to promote a single, synthetic Russian culture and identity to overcome the domestic conflicts of the past that destabilized and helped bring down both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. That Putin seeks one Russia while Trump wanted many Americas during his time in office is more than just a difference in political styles: it is a critical data point. It highlights the fact that a successful U.S. policy approach to Russia will rest in part on denying Putin and Russian operatives the possibility to exploit divisions in American society.

The United States' vulnerability to the Kremlin's subversion has been amplified by social media. American-made technology has magnified the impact of once fringe ideas and subversive actors around the world and become a tool in the hands of hostile states and criminal groups. Extremists can network and reach audiences as never before on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are designed to attract people's attention and divide them into affinity groups. Putin has weaponized this technology against the United States, taking advantage of the ways that social media undermines social cohesion and

erodes Americans' sense of a shared purpose. Policymakers should step up their cooperation with the private sector in order to cast light on and deter Russian intelligence operations and other efforts to exploit social media platforms. They also need to figure out ways to educate the American public about the perils of posting personal and political information online.

Making the United States and its society more resilient and less vulnerable to manipulation by tackling inequality, corruption, and polarization will require innovative policies across a huge range of issues. Perhaps the highest priority should be given to investing in people where they reside, particularly through education. Education can lower the barriers to opportunity and accurate information in a way that nothing else can. It can help people recognize the difference between fact and fiction. And it offers all people the chance not only to develop knowledge and learn skills but also to continue to transform themselves and their communities.

One thing U.S. leaders should avoid in seeking to foster domestic unity is attempting to mobilize Americans around the idea of a common enemy, such as China. Doing so risks backfiring by stirring up xenophobic anger toward Americans and immigrants of Asian heritage and thus fueling more divisions at home. Instead of trying to rally Americans against China, Biden should rally them in support of the democratic U.S. allies that Trump spurned and derided. Many of those countries, especially in Europe, find themselves in the same political predicament as the United States, as authoritarian leaders and powers seek to exploit socioeconomic

strife and populist proclivities among their citizens. Biden should base a new transatlantic agenda on the mutual fight against populism at home and authoritarianism abroad through economic rebuilding and democratic renewal.

Most important, Biden must do everything in his power to restore trust in government and to promote fairness, equity, and justice. As many Americans learned during Trump's presidency, no country, no matter how advanced, is immune to flawed leadership, the erosion of political checks and balances, and the degradation of its institutions. Democracy is not self-repairing. It requires constant attention. 🌐